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“So many pages a day” Writing, Compulsion, and Modernity

George Miller Beard's study of neurasthenia, *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences*, published in 1881, attributed the recent increase of nervousness to civilization. Or, to be more specific, to modern civilization, differentiated from the ancient by such phenomena as “steampower, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women.”¹ All these, Beard argued, had a debilitating impact on the nervous system, leading to its exhaustion or bankruptcy, which is exactly how he defined nervousness: “a lack of nerve-force.”² While the so-called brain-working classes, obviously including “men of letters,”³ were particularly vulnerable to neurasthenia, this was however compensated for by their superior longevity. One of the factors accounting for this state of affairs was, in his view, the “large liberty” available to “nearly all intellectual employments.”⁴

That liberty manifests itself specifically in control over time, as, for instance, literary men “can select the hours and days for their most exacting and important work; and when from any cause indisposed to hard thinking, can rest and recreate, or limit themselves to mechanical details.”⁵ The American neurologist imagines those who in their work rely on cerebral force living in ease when compared to muscle-workers carrying out forced and routine labour. In arguing for the superiority of brain-work, Beard liberates it also from worry to the extent that he sees the two in a healthy antithetical relation: “brain-work is the highest of

¹ George Miller Beard, *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881. Reprint: Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2008), 96.

² Beard, *American Nervousness*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁵ *Ibid.*

all antidotes to worry," and those who practise it are "less distressed about many things, less apprehensive of indefinite evil, and less disposed to magnify minute trials."⁶ The reason for this was that in the life of those engaged in an intellectual pursuit there is, as he put it, "less of the dreadful," though, he was careful to add that this would hold true as long as they were successful. To second his points about the relation of age to work he studied the biographies of eminent brain-workers,⁷ literati too, but intellectual mediocrity or failure did not enter into his investigation. When worry, distress or poverty engage Beard's attention, he tends to see them as afflictions experienced by those who live by the labour of the hands.

Ten years after Beard published his study, George Gissing wrote *New Grub Street*, a novel which may be seen as an inadvertent postscript to it, in that it broaches the subject of brain-work, exemplified by professional men of letters, but shows it haunted by anxiety, fear, and penury.

Bernard Bergonzi observes in his introduction to *New Grub Street* that work as a literary subject enters English fiction more prominently around the 1840s, and it means factory labour, though it is rare that novelists employ realism to flaunt before the reader their knowledge of the actual particulars of production.⁸ Indeed, a typical Victorian rendition of industrial reality, Herbert L. Sussman wrote some years earlier, "consists of smoke and flame seen from a distance"; even in an overtly industrial novel such as *Hard Times* descriptions concern less the factory interior and more "the psychological state of a machine-tender."⁹ It will take several decades for the novel to come up with a more comprehensive representation of the mechanics of work – this time, however, in the shape of the intellectual exertion of those who live by the pen.

With its insight into the world of literary production, the allied pressures of readership, market, and the publishing industry, *New Grub Street* deservedly merits the title of "the most explicit fictional study of literary life ever written in English."¹⁰ At times this excessive explicitness, it is suggested, may have stifled fictionality, such that the novel reads like "a sociological document,"¹¹ and so does not obviously lend itself to a context-free textual interpretation. Perhaps

⁶ Ibid., 202.

⁷ True, Beard actually analysed a comparable number of lives of persons of lesser distinction, and less known, but did not take under consideration the truly unsuccessful ones. Cf. Beard, *American Nervousness*, 220–21.

⁸ Bernard Bergonzi, introduction to George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 9.

⁹ Herbert L. Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine. The Literary Response to Technology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), 9, 68.

¹⁰ Bergonzi, Introduction, 9.

¹¹ J. P. Keating, *George Gissing: New Grub Street* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968).

responding to its transparency, many analyses of *New Grub Street* incorporate factual accounts of the new directions in the literary environment of the 1880s.¹² But the novel possibly may read also like a *psychological* document, for while it places literature on the receiving end, at which books and essays are finished articles – discussed, reviewed, purchased or ignored – it first of all puts under scrutiny the process of writing itself, and shows it to be an excruciating mental chore. Above all, in *New Grub Street* writing means labour: effortful, daily toil, propelled or stalled by the fear of failure.

As Bergonzi points out, in such a brutal depiction of writing Gissing distances himself from the popular image of the novelist as a genial, quirky character, never lost for words, whose works get written invisibly and, one is left to assume, easily. The conclusion drawn from such a representation is that the literary man is a figure of leisure with plenty of time on his hands.¹³ Not only enjoying the luxury of leisure, writers, to return to Beard's comments on brain-workers, are "masters of their time" who "work when work is easy"; nor do they need to "waste their force in urging themselves to work."¹⁴ In the eyes of many, intellectual or creative work would actually be non-work. That perception did not develop without the help of novelists themselves, somehow reluctant to associate writing with effort, since any open admission of painstaking creation, or, simply put, labour, would be an acknowledgment of professional weakness in a culture that aligns ease with cleverness and talent.

Focusing primarily on the process of making, Gissing deplores the contemporary commercialization of literature and its degeneration into trade, for which process he blames, among other things, modern journalism. Thus logically, the proposed neat, too neat and therefore unfair, dichotomy between culture and commerce has its embodiment in the contrast between the old and the modern type of writer, whose respective fields of production are novels and literary periodicals. And still more logically, he stands by the old-school novelist, even though, or perhaps precisely because, the hero Edwin Reardon, unlike entrepreneurial mercenaries, writes slowly, sufferingingly, and also increasingly badly. He writes to fail. What Gissing conceived as a larger cultural crisis he expressed through an individual calamity: the mortification of a professional author, one who writes for a living, and whose "struggle for subsistence" undoes his "literary endeavour"¹⁵ so that writing itself turns into a struggle.

¹² Several of such studies point out that Gissing's depiction of the literary environment of the 1880s suffers from distortions as he does not take into account many aspects of the changes. Cf., for instance, John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1978), 117–18; and Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London: MacMillan, 1975), 140–46.

¹³ Bergonzi, Introduction, 9.

¹⁴ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 207–208.

¹⁵ George Gissing, quoted in David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 81.

When writing must happen, it often refuses to happen. Reardon's story is that of ongoing creative inertia, increasing resistance of "the outworn imagination,"¹⁶ and fear its gradual erosion breeds. These adversities turn work into mental torment. While words may get penned, the attempted novel fails to gather direction, let alone momentum; repeatedly, as if himself going through the motions of writing, Gissing churns out his character's accounts of aborted ideas and discarded sentences which fail to meet the self-imposed standards. While Reardon pronounces a "dry and powerless brain" to be one constraint, another is his sense of aesthetic integrity: "I had never written a line that was meant to attract the vulgar,"¹⁷ he insists. However, this refusal to compromise one's standards of quality is perceived by those who count on the money a completed book may bring as "morbid conscientiousness."¹⁸ The recurrent image of the writer at work is one of futility: "endless circling, perpetual beginning, followed by frustration": with a mind that is "a shapeless whirl of nothings,"¹⁹ one can only "stare at the blank sheets of paper in an anguish of hopelessness"²⁰; the only vision which this sight can inspire is that of empty pockets. In one of many attempts to grasp the reasons for his creative crisis and thus justify his indolence, Reardon says:

My efforts are utterly vain; I suppose the prospect of pennilessness is itself a hindrance; the fear haunts me. With such terrible real things pressing upon me, my imagination can shape nothing substantial. When I have laboured out a story, I suddenly see it in a light of such contemptible triviality that to work at it is an impossible thing.²¹

Gissing is never one to equivocate: the crisis is set off when one writes with a vested interest, when one writes to get the book "finished and sold."²² The real becomes the stumbling block for the imagination, which cannot eschew, or transcend, mundane concerns and mercenary purposes. The "substantial" which it is unable to shape means words on the page as well as, if not more than, the money they will bring.

In the "Gospel of Mammonism" chapter of *Past and Present* Thomas Carlyle asked: "What is it that the modern English soul does ... dread infinitely, and contemplate with entire despair? What is this Hell? ... what is it? With hesitation, with astonishment, I pronounce it to be: The terror of 'Not succeeding...'" Not

¹⁶ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²² *Ibid.*, 86. Emphasis mine.

succeeding, in turn, Carlyle defines simply as “not making money.”²³ What with the increased commercialization of literary creation, in the later decades of the nineteenth century men of letters found themselves terrorized by the pressure of economically conceived success. And accordingly, poverty, material degradation aside, functioned as an all too legible index of failure, which therefore did not merit compassion but condescension. Amy Reardon’s increasing disaffection for her husband has its origin in her acquired awareness of the power of money: “If I had to choose between the glorious reputation with poverty and a contemptible popularity with wealth, I should choose the latter.”²⁴ While some residue of idealism may be discerned in her suspicion of popularity, which she clearly dissociates from reputation, it soon will become obvious that it is poverty that truly earns her contempt.

The fear of failure and the fear of destitution become inseparable. So by no means is there then “less of the dreadful” in the writer’s life, nor is poverty a source of anxiety afflicting only muscle-workers. George Beard, like many others, was apt to accord to poverty some ambivalence, seeing in it a force that can possibly goad one to make an escape. Yet if poverty has the capacity to “stimulate and strengthen,” these are rare occurrences. In most instances, “it subjugates and destroys.”²⁵ In the case of Reardon such destructive work is done by not so much poverty itself, but its anticipation: the fear of poverty reified by the workhouse.

The workhouse, occasionally mentioned in the novel, invokes two principal anxieties: the prospect of penury and the pressure of time under which the professional writer travails. In *New Grub Street* the workhouse enters the consciousness as a sound: “the chiming and striking” of its clock heard on wakeful nights bring the “worst torture to his mind” because they get Reardon closer to facing writing, which, since becoming a necessity, has turned into “a dreaded task.”²⁶ When George Crabbe depicts the workhouse in *The Borough*, he cannot do so without mentioning “That large loud clock, which tolls each dreaded hour,” to then add: “Those gates and locks, and all those signs of power: / It is a prison, with a milder name, / Which few inhabit without dread or shame.”²⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century the workhouse maintained its evil reputation as the institution of utmost degradation that even the poorest became desperate to avoid. Crabbe’s representation culminates with equating it with the prison, and so reinforces its notorious image of a place of stringent discipline rather than relief. To the already-mentioned fear of poverty and confinement which the allusion to the workhouse activates, one must also add associations with the industrial milieu.

²³ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Teddington: The Echo Library, 2007), 111.

²⁴ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 83.

²⁵ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 296.

²⁶ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 151–52.

²⁷ George Crabbe, *The Borough, Letter XVIII: The Poor and Their Dwellings*, accessed January 31, 2012, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5210/pg5210.txt>.

For Reardon the workhouse clock striking the hours in an inexorable countdown summons him to his task in the way in which the factory bell summons operatives to start their shift.

Gissing repeatedly deploys allusions to industry so as to indicate the mechanization of the creative mind and augment the sense of dreariness that coerced writing, done for the sake of remuneration and deadline-orientated, involves:

The ordering of his day was thus. At nine, after breakfast, he sat down to his desk, and worked till one. Then came dinner, followed by a walk. ... At about half-past three he again seated himself; and wrote until half-past six, when he had a meal. Then once more to work from half-past seven to ten. Numberless were the experiments he had tried for the day's division. The slightest interruption of the order for the time being put him out of gear;

Sometimes the three hours' labour of a morning resulted in half-a-dozen lines, corrected into illegibility. His brain would not work; he could not recall the simplest synonyms; intolerable faults of composition drove him mad.²⁸

For one thing, this description of work stands in stark contrast with Beard's idea of the writer enjoying liberty unavailable to muscle-workers. Even though the rigorous schedule within which writing is enframèd is of the fictional novelist's *own* invention, it does not make him the "master of his time."²⁹ Not a master of his time, he is not the master of his mind either, when he tries to force his barren imagination to earn his keep. Clearly the self-imposed discipline of the time-table jars with writing so as to effectively disable the novelist, suffering and stuttering in a "creative agony."³⁰ To the casual observer, the schedule looks a wholesome and rational arrangement, yet no spell of work ends with a record of an actually accomplished task. If Reardon can mention any marks of progress resulting from one sitting, they are so paltry that they actually document stagnation: "half-a-dozen lines" or one page are his standards of measurement.

Such quantities are all the more pathetic when set against the goal of a three-volume novel, the format which still dominated the contemporary literary scene, and which seems to the suffering writer "an interminable desert."³¹ At some point Jasper Milvain, Reardon's opposite, the modern professional man, calls it "a triple-headed monster sucking the blood of the English novelist,"³² but since his own work does not entail fiction-making this phrase ultimately expresses lit-

²⁸ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 154.

²⁹ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 207.

³⁰ P. J. Keating, *George Gissing: New Grub Street* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), 13.

³¹ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 80.

³² *Ibid.*, 235.

tle genuine concern, and turns out to be yet another clever but vacuous metaphor. For novelists implicated in the system the completion of three volumes, however abominable, could not be dismissed because of its pecuniary ramifications. As Reardon explains,

An author of moderate repute may live on a yearly three-volume novel ... the man who is obliged to sell his book out and out, and who gets from one to two hundreds for it. ... A sudden change to that system would throw three-fourths of the novelists out of work.³³

Behind the system, it has to be remembered, stood circulating libraries which demanded novels in three volumes so that they could exact bigger subscriptions from their readers-cum-customers.

The point that Gissing makes is that in a situation when writing is one's sole occupation, and therefore one's sole means of income, books are not so much written as manufactured, and so implicated in a system of quasi-industrial regularity. Indeed, it is not just work but actually clockwork-like work that becomes a sign of apparent recuperation from imaginative crises. And yet this much-desired rhythm hardly looks healthy when it consists in

ticking off [the] stipulated quantum of manuscript each four-and-twenty hours. [Reardon] wrote a very small hand; sixty written slips of the kind of paper he habitually used would represent – thanks to the astonishing system which prevails in such matters: large type, wide spacing, frequency of blank pages – a passable three-hundred-page volume. On an average he could write four such slips a day; so here we have fifteen days for the volume, and forty-five for the completed book.³⁴

The mechanical mode of production makes writing involve calculation. Most scenes of or talks about literary creation that Gissing tenders are fraught with figures: numbers of lines and pages that are written, quantities of copies that can be sold, sums of pounds that can be earned, not to mention the sums borrowed and owed, and rent to be paid. The two kinds of figures are inseparable: to the relieved writer's announcement, "Tomorrow I finish the second volume," his wife responds with, "And in a week ... we shan't have a shilling left."³⁵ But the calculation with which Gissing more heavily invests modern writing entails dishonest deliberation. Dishonesty informs publishers' methods as they deploy the aforementioned "large type, wide spacing, frequency of blank pages," while writers

³³ Ibid., 236.

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

³⁵ Ibid., 161.

invent, as if in response, their own artful expedients. How does one write when one *must* write, yet one's mind keeps drawing a blank? To put it frankly, one cheats. What is already in its inception "a 'thin' story," can be made even thinner when spun into three volumes,³⁶ if one falls back on "laborious padding."³⁷ With the frustrated imagination, padding means not verbosity but rather overproduction of blank space: "Descriptions of locality, deliberate analysis of character or motive, demanded far too great an effort He kept as much as possible to dialogue; the space is filled so much more quickly..."³⁸ In Gissing's reductive vision of the literary environment of his day, the alternative to "the facile pen"³⁹ wielded by new literary men are "cunning fingers,"⁴⁰ a phrase actually used in *The Nether World*, but quite apt in this context too. Still, these subterfuges, though exposed, are exonerated as long as they mortify those who employ them in their dogged determination "to go on at any cost, to write, let the result be what it would."⁴¹

When writing for money one cannot afford to take liberties with time: one must simply, as the modern practical approach dictates, "do a certain number of pages every day. Good or bad, never mind."⁴² Economic constraint corrupts writing into not only a dishonest, but also a crude, repetitive performance. From this recommendation of mechanical regularity the time-table follows naturally, an obvious borrowing from the world of industrial production. Ironically, for the failing creative writer, turned literary labourer, it becomes the last resort, an ultimate strategy or stratagem that replaces inspiration which, however, goes awry as mental energy becomes misspent, and the mind, all too conscious of the external reality, fearful of potential discomforts and disruptions that could incapacitate writing, turns to the conditions of work rather than to the work itself. Hence the endless tinkering with "the day's division,"⁴³ each of which adjustments seeks to rouse the writer from mental indolence. It is precisely in such a course of action, bereft of spontaneity and focused on method, the "pre-established apparatus," that Carlyle saw "the mechanical genius of [his] time diffusing itself into other provinces."⁴⁴

³⁶ Ibid., 153.

³⁷ Ibid., 161.

³⁸ Ibid., 154.

³⁹ Ibid., 492.

⁴⁰ Gissing, *The Nether World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

⁴¹ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 154.

⁴² Ibid., 86.

⁴³ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁴ Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," in Alan Sheridan, ed., *Thomas Carlyle, Selected Writing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 65. For Carlyle another manifestation of the mechanical genius is the need to "make interest with some existing corporation." Writers no longer can go it alone when "Literature, too, has its Paternoster-row mechanism, its Trade-dinners, its Editorial conclaves, and huge subterranean, puffing bellows; so that books are not only printed, but, in a great measure, written and sold by machinery." Cf. page 66.

While recourse to the method and discipline does not work for Reardon, whom the novel posits as “the old type of unpractical artist,”⁴⁵ his counterpart, the up-and-coming “literary man of the 1882” comfortably employs it, and this ease with the “pre-established apparatus” epitomizes his modernity. Evidently, the contrast in the use of and attitude to the method is part of the already-mentioned larger juxtaposition between culture and commerce. Once again, at the centre of Gissing’s attention is the act of literary production, here exemplified by Jasper Milvain’s account of his busy day:

I got up at 7.30, and whilst I breakfasted I read through a volume I had to review. By 10.30 the review was written – three-quarters of a column of the *Evening Budget*. ... from 10.30 to 11.00, I smoked a cigar and reflected ... At eleven, I was ready to write my Saturday causerie for the *Will o’ the Wisp*; it took me till close upon one o’clock ... At one, I rushed out to a dirty little eating-house ... Was back again by a quarter to two, having in the meantime sketched a paper for *The West End*. Pipe in mouth, I sat down to leisurely artistic work; by five half the paper was done; the other half remains for to-morrow. From five to half-past I read four newspapers and two magazines, and from half past to a quarter to six I jotted down several ideas that had come to me whilst reading. At six I was again in the dirty eating-house, satisfying a ferocious hunger. Home once more at 6.45, and for two hours wrote steadily at a long affair I have in hand for *The Current*⁴⁶

This resumé of the writer’s day is a curious combination of the flamboyant and the pedestrian in that it registers an impressive number and variety of undertaken or accomplished tasks, but does so with a dire meticulousness which would have made Robinson Crusoe proud. Or envious – after all, he did not display a similar awareness of even quarters of an hour. While such exactitude seemed natural to the economically oriented consciousness, it seems out of place when exhibited by a creative mind. In the case of Gissing’s modern literary man, writing becomes a tightly scripted activity as its different forms and installments get allocated within the requisite slots of the time-table. At work is the division of labour. What vindicates this otherwise demeaning clock-work regularity is the end product, or actually end products in the shape of so many pieces of writing for so many different literary periodicals, and so many different readers. Even though production does not have a mass character in the sense of making iden-

⁴⁵ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 154. The expression is originally used by Milvain in a sympathetic yet somewhat patronizing manner. Certainly, within the scope of the modern literary market whose practices Gissing deplors, Reardon cuts a figure of obsolescence, whose refusal and failure to act practically force him out of business.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

tical products, one cannot but entertain a vision of a one-man factory with finished articles coming off the conveyor belt.⁴⁷

If Milvain professes himself the new literary man, the novelty inheres in his being, as Adrian Poole sums it up: "a hard working professional who hires out his labour at different levels, contributing to different grades of magazine and journal, reviews, essays, literary gossip, perhaps even a leader column for a daily paper."⁴⁸ Hard-working does not however mean here slow and laborious; rather it signifies quick, almost effortless, competent – in one word: efficient. And it is more than just speed, for the modern writer is one with not only an athletic but also an elastic kind of mind, able to negotiate between diverse styles and purposes. Varying his style depending on the magazine for which he produces a given piece, his remarkable powers of adaptation allow him to do well despite his acknowledged lack of talent. His deliberately pursued line of trade is not fiction, which demands originality, but journalism, which is better suited to his "facile pen." Having bragged of the number of jobs so promptly done, the writer hears a question which does, on the face of it, concern quality: "what is the value of it all?" but which he elects to understand economically: "Probably ten to twelve guineas."⁴⁹ And this evaluation completes the image of the new literary man as one who has grasped the importance of adaptation, for along with adjustments of the style, tempo or subject matter of writing, there is a question of larger adjustment whereby the writer, Gissing points out, may have to go with the flow of commercialisation of literature. Commercialisation and industrialisation of writing concur, because producing for the market requires that one adopt a clock-work mode of work to ensure efficiency, and therefore remuneration. And facile writing lines up with facile reading; the professional literary man should "know something about every subject – or ... know where to get the knowledge."⁵⁰ Such is the function of the British Museum Reading Room, which the modern writer does not, and cannot, treat as a place of slow reading, but only one of skimming and "hurried consultation[s];"⁵¹ productive of what David Grylls brilliantly calls "frothy omniscience."⁵²

Ultimately, the fundamental difference between the two antithetical writers in *New Grub Street* lies in their response to their respective literary abilities.

⁴⁷ That creation of fiction can acquire a truly industrial dimension that may be illustrated with Alexandre Dumas's *Fabrique de romans*. Contemporary allegations had it that the French novelist's productivity, so extraordinary that it defied logic, was aided by a literary workshop of sorts, a fiction factory in which his assistants were helping him with research and fabrication of tales for which he gave outlines. Cf. Hannu Salmi, *Nineteenth-Century Europe. A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 14, 149.

⁴⁸ Poole, *Gissing in Context*, 141.

⁴⁹ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 213.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 504.

⁵² Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing*, 79.

Both recognize themselves as men of limited talents: with no *mauvais honte* Reardon defines himself as a “mediocrity,”⁵³ while Milvain quickly realizes he has no talent for writing novels. Neither turns out to be cut out for making fiction, but Milvain can astutely reinvent himself for the sake of the success he craves, whereas Reardon begins his career as a literary man by writing critical essays, to then turn to novels with the awareness that he does it against his “intellectual temper ... of the student, the scholar.”⁵⁴ Misled by the moderate success of some of his early books, he carries on, soon to exhaust his creativity and find himself crippled financially and aesthetically. The destruction of the writer that is narrated in *New Grub Street* does not happen only under the influence of external pressures and the anxieties they foster; just as fatal is the lack of inner strength to negotiate them. In the jargon of the day this vital property is called “practicality”; the ability to conform to economic rather than artistic demands, the capacity for “mak[ing] concessions” so as to “supply the market.” To survive one has to endorse the view that while literature may for some be practised as art, for scores of others it “is a trade.” As Milvain says in his brash manifesto, “Your successful man of letters is your skillful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising.”⁵⁵ On several occasions Gissing relates the cultural crisis of his day to a “conscious insincerity of workmanship,”⁵⁶ but he knows that in the end integrity may not be tenable when challenged by the problem of economic survival. Mere deficiency of creative energies may not destroy the writer, but deficiency in adapting one’s energies does.

⁵³ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

Małgorzata Nitka

„Tyle a tyle stron dziennie”
Pisanie, przymus i nowoczesność

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest analizą procesu twórczego ukazanego w powieści George’a Gissinga *New Grub Street*. Dziewiętnastowieczny neurolog amerykański George M. Beard uważał pracę umysłową za „najlepsze antidotum na zmartwienie”, podkreślając, że w życiu ludzi skupionych na aktywności intelektualnej jest mniej miejsca na lęki. Jednakże powyższe twierdzenie jest słuszne tylko w wypadku, gdy pracę wieńczy sukces i satysfakcja.

Dziesięć lat po opublikowaniu przez Bearda studium neurastenii, Gissing wydał swoją powieść, której tematem jest między innymi świadomość pisarza. Bohater książki Edwin Reardon to przykład człowieka, dla którego pisanie jest rodzajem pracy umysłowej będącej, odwrotnie niż sugerował Beard, źródłem trosk i lęków, wręcz śmiertelną udręką. Pisanie może zmienić się w doświadczenie traumatyczne, gdy zdeterminowane ekonomicznym przymusem, dyktaturą bezwzględnych praw rynku wydawniczego i presją czasu polega głównie, a często wyłącznie, na zapełnianiu określonej liczby stron w określonym terminie. O ile podobne napięcia nie były dla twórców niczym nowym, o tyle w drugiej połowie dziewiętnastego wieku – w realiach komercjalizacji kultury – uległy zintensyfikowaniu, stanowiącemu jedną z cech nowoczesności.

Małgorzata Nitka

« Une telle quantité de pages par jour » Écriture, contrainte et modernité

Résumé

Le présent article est une analyse du procédé créatif montré dans le roman *New Grub Street* de George Gissing. George M. Beard, neurologue américain du XIX^e siècle, trouvait que le travail intellectuel est « le meilleur antidote contre l'ennui » en soulignant qu'il n'y a pas de place pour l'anxiété dans la vie des gens concentrés sur l'activité intellectuelle. Mais cette thèse est juste uniquement au cas où le travail est couronné de succès et de satisfaction.

Dix ans après la publication de l'étude sur la neurasthénie de Beard, Gissing a publié son roman dont le sujet est entre autres la conscience de l'écrivain. Edwin Reardon, héros du roman mentionné, est un homme pour qui l'écriture est une sorte de travail intellectuel étant, contrairement aux suggestions de Beard, une source de chagrins et de peurs, voire un tourment mortel. Si l'écriture – étant déterminée par une contrainte économique, par la dictature des lois intransigeantes du marché de l'édition et par la pression du temps – consiste principalement, et souvent uniquement, à remplir un nombre déterminé de pages dans un temps déterminé, elle peut se transformer en une expérience traumatique. Si de pareilles tensions n'étaient rien de nouveau pour les créateurs d'alors, elles se sont intensifiées dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle – à l'époque de la commercialisation de la culture –, ce qui constituait l'un des traits de la modernité.